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ABSTRACT

This report explores how service providers and educators can better understand, support, and work with Puerto Rican natural support systems through a variety of collaborative strategies. A first section presents a definition of Puerto Rican natural support systems and a discussion of how they are operationalized, and describes the following four general types: (1) the extended family; (2) folk healers; (3) religious groups; and (4) merchant and social clubs. A framework is suggested for examining the breakdown of those natural systems. The following five causes of the breakdown of natural support systems are considered: (1) temporary crisis; (2) inability to respond; (3) refusal to assist; (4) systems are non-existent; and (5) shame. The typology of reasons for breakdowns is important as these systems often represent the first and only source for assistance for many Puerto Ricans and other Hispanic American groups. An examination of barriers to collaborating with natural support systems shows that lack of trust, underpinnings of assessment and intervention, knowledge of others' work and mission, and service delivery structure and logistics can all impede useful cooperation. Final sections look at the need for further research on the Puerto Rican community and present implications and recommendations for reaching this community through use of the natural support systems. Included are 36 references. (JB)

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CENTER ON FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES, SCHOOLS AND CHILDREN'S LEARNING

The nation's schools must do more to improve the education of all children, but schools cannot do this alone. More will be accomplished if families and communities work with children, with each other, and with schools to promote successful students.

The mission of this Center is to conduct research, evaluations, policy analyses, and dissemination to produce new and useful knowledge about how families, schools, and communities influence student motivation, learning, and development. A second important goal is to improve the connections between and among these major social institutions.

Two research programs guide the Center's work: the Program on the Early Years of Childhood, covering children aged 0-10 through the elementary grades; and the Program on the Years of Early and Late Adolescence, covering youngsters aged 11-19 through the middle and high school grades.

Research on family, school, and community connections must be conducted to understand more about all children and all families, not just those who are economically and educationally advantaged or already connected to school and community resources. The Center's projects pay particular attention to the diversity of family cultures and backgrounds and to the diversity in family, school, and community practices that support families in helping children succeed across the years of childhood and adolescence. Projects also examine policies at the federal, state, and local levels that produce effective partnerships.

A third program of Institutional Activities includes a wide range of dissemination projects to extend the Center's national leadership. The Center's work will yield new information, practices, and policies to promote partnerships among families, communities, and schools to benefit children's learning.

Abstract

This report presents a definition of natural support systems and outlines how they apply to Puerto Rican communities. The report describes four types of Puerto Rican natural support systems and includes a framework for analyzing how they work or break down. It concludes by examining the implications of educators better serving the Puerto Rican community through collaboration with natural support systems.

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Introduction

The last few years have witnessed a rediscovery of natural support systems as a means of reaching populations in great need (Albrecht, Adelman, et al., 1987; Gottlieb, 1988; Pearson, 1990). The use of natural support systems by any racial or ethnic group is greatly influenced by its beliefs, history, and traditions about helping its members as opposed to assistance from outsiders, as well as by the lack of available resources in the larger society (Weber, 1982).

Puerto Rican natural support systems, as well as those of other Hispanic groups, represent an important resource for meeting a variety of human needs. Consequently, to serve Puerto Ricans effectively, service providers and educators must acquire knowledge of how these systems function and explore ways to support and even collaborate with these systems. This is particularly crucial to the provision of assistance within a culturally sensitive context for a group that is experiencing dramatic increases in numbers (Del Pinal and DeNavas, 1990; Valdivieso and Davis, 1988), and is facing formidable barriers in receiving adequate education and services.

This report explores how service providers and educators can better understand, support, and work with Puerto Rican natural support systems through a variety of collaborative strategies. It is divided into the following sections: (1) a definition and operationalization of Puerto Rican natural support systems; (2) an examination of existing barriers to collaborating with natural support systems; (3) research topics linking natural support systems and the education and well-being of Puerto Rican families and children; and (4) implications and recommendations for reaching the Puerto Rican community through use of natural support systems.

Puerto Rican Natural Support Systems: What Are They? How Do They Work?

This section provides a definition of natural support systems and a discussion of how they are operationalized, with particular relevance to Puerto Ricans. It includes: (1) a definition of natural support systems; (2) four perspectives on natural support systems; (3) descriptions of four types of natural support systems; and (4) a framework for examining the breakdown of natural support systems.

A review of the professional literature reveals a multitude of perspectives on natural support systems. However, the definition provided by Baker (1977: 139) is probably the most comprehensive and best captures the essence of Puerto Rican natural support systems:

> The word 'natural' is used to differentiate such systems from the professional care-giving systems of the community... Natural support systems include family and friendship groups, local informal care-giving professionals, and mutual help groups. In most communities there exists a network of individuals and groups who band together to help each other in dealing with a variety of problems in living. Such groupings which provide attachments among individuals or between groups such that adaptive competence is improved in dealing with short-term crises and life transitions are referred ... to as natural support systems.

Baker's definition attempts to connect a variety of helping systems together and provides an excellent foundation for the study of natural support systems. Unlike social networks which reflect a unique configuration of informal and formal support systems, natural support systems represent all potential informal sources of assistance.

Schools and human service agencies can take one of four approaches to Puerto Rican natural support systems, each of which has far-reaching implications for the structure, provision, and ultimate effectiveness of education and human services. One approach is to ignore natural support systems. This approach manifests itself in policies and services that do not take into consideration cultural strengths. A second approach undermines non-traditional systems. This approach weakens a person's natural support systems if, for example, teachers or counselors will meet only with "biological" parents and not with god-parents or other significant individuals because they are not considered "family."

A third, more progressive approach, incorporates key cultural themes. This approach might entail learning about Puerto Rican natural support systems and making an effort to modify education and service delivery to incorporate key principles. For example, schools can develop community projects that identify important indigenous institutions and talk about them in the classroom as part of lesson plans. A fourth approach is the most promising. Schools and human service agencies can work in collaboration with natural support systems in a planned manner, identifying shared responsibilities. What typifies this approach is the conscious attempt to view family and children within a comprehensive framework of family, school, and community systems working together. This approach will be addressed later in this report.

Hispanic natural support systems have received increased attention in the professional literature in the last decade. Escobar and Randolph (1985) have applied the concept to

family intervention. Vega (1990) and Romero (1980) have applied natural support systems to health and prevention. DeAnda (1985) has used the concept in her work with stress and Hispanic adolescent mothers. Delgado (1986, 1991) has used natural support systems in assessment and intervention with Puerto Rican substance abusers, as have De La Rosa (1988) and Singer and Borrero (1988). Clearly, natural support systems have been used to address a wide range of issues and problems.

Delgado and Humm-Delgado (1982) have developed a framework that helps classify the types of natural support systems available in the Puerto Rican community. However, human service providers and educators must not assume that the natural support systems to be described below are utilized by all Puerto Ricans. The higher the social class and degree of acculturation, the easier it becomes for Puerto Ricans, as well as for members of other Hispanic groups, to seek assistance from formal institutions such as hospitals, educational centers, community mental health centers, and other agencies and organizations. Puerto Ricans who have "limited social skills" and resources will also have limited access to quality care and services. Consequently, they are forced to limit their help-seeking options.

Four Types of Natural Support Systems

The following descriptions of Puerto Rican natural support systems attempt to provide a baseline from which an informed assessment can be made of needs and resources available to aid this community. Natural support systems within Puerto Rican communities fall into four general types and meet a wide range of community instrumental and expressive needs: (1) extended family (in addition to blood-relatives, this category includes friends, neighbors, and significant others); (2) folk healers (spiritists, *santeros*, *santiaguadores*, and herbalists); (3) religious groups (Catholicism, Pentecostals, Seventh Day Adventist, and Jehovah's Witnesses); and (4) merchant and social clubs (grocery stores, botanical shops, market places, hometown clubs).

<u>The Extended Family</u>

The definition of family within the Puerto Rican culture incorporates elaborate kinship ritual practices. Hispanic families very often have value systems that are different from each other, depending upon country of origin and degree of acculturation. However, adherence to traditional values and beliefs concerning family structure and roles vary only slightly among Hispanic groups and differ considerably from Anglo family structure in the United States (Vega, 1990).

Mizio's study (1978:7) of the Puerto Rican family highlights the complexity of how family is defined:

> Practitioners ... need to recognize that the Puerto Rican definition of family goes way beyond the family of origin so that it encompasses not only those related by blood and marriage but includes those who are tied to it as well as through custom. Reciprocal obligations and support exist in these relationships.

Thus, the extended family has traditionally been a prime source of strength and support among Puerto Ricans, with various members sharing principal roles and responsibilities.

This is not to say that Anglo families are not a source of strength to their members. However, the degree of reliance by Puerto Ricans upon extended family members and their willingness to adopt close friends and neighbors into the family constellation and to provide them with an active part in the family decision-making process is virtually unseen in family structures that are based upon nuclear principles.

The Puerto Rican extended family, within the natural support systems constellation, can respond to a multitude of needs (Rogler & Conney, 1984). Delgado and Humm-Delgado (1982) identify seventeen key functions of Puerto Rican families: (1) housing; (2) child rearing and parent education; (3) babysitting, day care, respite care, foster care, or adoption; (4) advocacy; (5) translation and interpretation; (6) recreation; (7) medical care; (8) financial aid or credit; (9) care and treatment of the physically challenged or aged; (10) information and referral; (11) identification with Puerto Rican role models, leaders, or experts; (12) friendship, companionship, and trust; (13) emotional support for interpersonal problems; (14) crisis intervention; (15) continuation of cultural traditions; (16) communication in Spanish; and (17) accessibility regardless of time or day.

The Puerto Rican extended family network can be quickly mobilized during a period of crisis. Virtually every member of the family will be called upon to assist according to their own constraints and the resources at their disposal. For example, if a family member is left homeless due to some catastrophe, someone will provide food or money; another clothes; yet another will assist in obtaining help from governmental sources. Thus, the family will band together to meet all of the presenting needs. Without an extended family, Puerto Ricans would be forced to rely upon formal services.

Folk Healers

Folk healing can be found throughout the world (Kiev, 1964), including the Caribbean and Latin America (Fabrega, 1974). Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans each have their own

version of the folk healer. In Mexican culture, the primary folk healer is the *curandero* (Kiev, 1968; Trotter & Chavira, 1981); among Puerto Ricans one will find spiritists (Harwood, 1977; Morales-Dorta, 1976), *santiguadores*, and herbalists (Delgado, 1978b, 1979); Cubans have the *santero* (Gleason, 1973, 1975; Sandoval, 1971). A detailed description of Puerto Rican folk healers is beyond the scope of this report. Consequently, for the purposes of analysis, only the general principles of Puerto Rican folk healing will be addressed. According to Delgado (1978: 50-51), the following eight factors have greatly influenced the attractiveness and effectiveness of Puerto Rican folk healers:

1. Both healer and patron share similar expectations of process and respective roles in the therapeutic relationship (Delgado, 1988).

2. Folk healers have unquestioned power and authority and are expected to bring about cures in relatively short periods of time. Thus, patrons have extreme faith in their therapists.

3. The power of suggestion is an important element in any form of therapy and is closely tied to faith in the healing process.

4. The use of hypnotic techniques as a therapeutic tool further enhances the role of healer and makes the patron more receptive to help.

5. Common language serves to facilitate communication. Language, in this instance, not only refers to Spanish, but also expressions and descriptions of symptomatology.

6. The naming process, an important element in all forms of folk healing, serves to provide answers to why misfortune and illness are present. It also serves to structure, define, and provide meaning to aberrant behavior.

7. Healing is action-oriented and requires the patron to be active in his or her recovery.

8. Folk healing serves as a mechanism for the attainment of power and control over an environment which is often perceived as hostile, unpredictable, and uncontrollable.

The above factors are firmly rooted in the healing process and cannot be easily dismissed by formal providers and institutions. These factors have cultural meaning and must be taken into account in any effort to reach this population.

Puerto Rican folk healers are deeply rooted in Puerto Rican culture and represent African (Yoruba), Indian (Taino), and Spanish influences. As already noted, there are four types of folk healers within the Puerto Rican culture. Each healer follows a different philosophy, and

the community has an awareness of the roles and functions represented by each healer. The spiritist (medium) and the *santero* (saintist) are the primary healers who work with the metaphysical, while the herbalist and *santiaguador* focus on the physical side of illness (Delgado, 1979a).

Religion

The importance of religion, particularly Catholicism, within Hispanic culture cannot be underestimated. However, its degree of influence differs among Hispanic groups. The role of the Catholic Church is still prominent in the lives of Mexicans, Cubans, and other groups. Among Puerto Ricans, however, Catholicism is playing a diminishing role, with Pentecostals, Seventh Day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses making significant inroads into this community.

The function of religion as a natural support system extends beyond meeting the spiritual needs of practitioners. Religious institutions play a prominent role in providing for recreational, educational, and social needs (Garrison, 1974; Murrieta, 1977). Garrison's description (1974: 578) of the variety of services provided by Pentecostals highlights their importance within the Puerto Rican community:

> Each of these small churches has a missionary society that answers requests of members and non-members, visits homes, and cares for the ill and disabled. In addition to pastoral counseling, the ministries and the missionary societies provide emergency financial aid, go to the airport to meet new arrivals and orient them to the city, and locate housing and employment for members throughout the Pentecostal grapevine. All of these churches support several Pentecostal programs to rehabilitate drug addicts, prostitutes, and other outcasts of society. Most Pentecostals go to their church with any problem they might have. Services offered by the church are provided from the resources within the group and within the broader network of Pentecostal affiliations.

This description of services can also be applied to Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and some Catholic affiliated Hispanic organizations (Murrieta, 1977).

Garrison's description of Pentecostals resembles that of a multi-service center. These institutions are located in the community, are staffed by bilingual-bicultural persons, and attempt to meet both the spiritual and physical needs of believers. Further, the leaders of the organization have a keen understanding and appreciation for the trials and tribulations confronting those seeking assistance because they live and practice in the community.

Merchant and Social Clubs

The presence of indigenous institutions (merchant and social clubs) are also important Puerto Rican natural support systems. These institutions usually take the form of *bodegas* (grocery stores), *botanicas* (botanical shops), restaurants, beauty parlors and other similar businesses, and social clubs (Delgado and Humm-Delgado, 1982; Vasquez, 1974). These establishments are owned, operated, and patronized by community residents.

In examining the role of the bodega, one quickly becomes aware of its importance within the Puerto Rican community. As Vasquez (1974: 34-35) has indicated:

> The bodega is a convenient location serving as a "hang-out," and emergency loan source, a place to get easy credit, a check-cashing place, and a type of information center.... I found that it was a place where its customers could find recreation, vocational and guidance counseling, and often someone to assist them in filling out forms such as welfare and school applications. The grocery store owner and customers traded "tips" with each other as where or how to get a job. They provided instructions on how to receive unemployment or social services....

Thus, it is possible to view the role of bodegas from a multi-faceted perspective; when this is done, in many ways the bodega is an informal multi-service center.

Botanicas, on the other hand, can be considered cultural variations of pharmacies. Botanicas are establishments where the community can purchase herbs and healing paraphernalia prescribed by folk healers. Customers, however, do not have to have gone to a folk healer, if they do not wish. Nevertheless, they can obtain a consultation from someone who works in the botanical shop.

Last, residents can obtain assistance in employment, housing, and other areas through hometown or other social clubs. In addition, social clubs sponsor baseball competitions and teams, domino contests, and festivals. These institutions often attempt to provide a bridge between towns in Puerto Rico and cities in the United States. At first glance, these institutions appear to be meeting social-recreational needs in the community. However, they also meet a wide range of social, economic and brokering needs (interpreters, advice, etc.). Thus, merchant and social clubs form an integral part of Puerto Rican natural support systems.

A Framework for Examining the Breakdown of Natural Support Systems

It is very important to understand that much has happened to Puerto Rican natural support systems in the past several decades, as a result of their uprooting, migration, and acculturation. Consequently, the state of Puerto Rican natural support systems must be carefully assessed and consideration given to what extent, if any, they can be involved in providing assistance to community members (Delgado, 1986). The cause of natural support systems breakdown, or inability to assist, will dictate to a large degree the type and level of collaboration possible. The typology that follows attempts to classify the causes of the breakdown, with implications for intervention. Delgado (1986) notes that there are five major categories for natural support systems breakdown:

Type I: Temporary Crisis. As a result of a temporary internal crisis, the natural support system cannot be relied upon to provide assistance. An internal crisis can be that a key member of the support system may have been hospitalized, or severe unemployment has caused important members to withdraw financial assistance to more needy family members. The natural support system remains in place and resumes its historical roles when circumstances change for the better.

Type II: Inability to Respond. This situation may be the result of various factors, such as demands for assistance that are beyond the capabilities of the support system (e.g., financial assistance, medical care for severe injury). However the level of demands for assistance may change to enable the natural support system to provide help to a reasonable number of people or those in greatest need. Consequently, inability to respond may be transitory and does not exclude the possibility of future support. Unlike Type I where temporary circumstances do not allow assistance to be provided, Type II is very specific in noting that the requests for assistance are beyond the capabilities of the natural support systems.

Type III: Refusal to Assist. This state of natural support systems breakdown may result from: (1) Lack of a solid relationship (e.g., person-in-need does not possess the skills required to develop and maintain a supportive relationship, or participates in few social situations, restricting the opportunities to develop necessary ties) -- in essence, he or she requires a tremendous amount of support, time, and resources; (2) there is a history of negative experiences between parties (e.g., disruptive influence on the helper) -- the person-in-need has a history of making life very difficult for those who help; (3) the presenting "problem" is not perceived as a problem when compared with other issues confronting the support system (e.g., the helper is providing assistance to many others with "greater" need); and (4) the person-in-need has historically relied heavily upon his or her support system and has either not been able to reciprocate, or refused to do so when called upon to assist -- in

essence, the relationship is one-sided. Refusal to assist may result from one or more of these reasons.

Type IV: Non-Existent. This type of breakdown can be the result of: (1) disintegration of the support system over a long period of time; (2) as a result of uprooting, the natural support system was left behind and has not been replaced in the new environment; or (3) as a result of a disaster, the natural support system is no longer available -- for example, fire may devastate entire city blocks, resulting in natural support systems being displaced.

Type V: Shame. Natural support systems are very attractive as a resource for aid. However, when circumstances are such that the person-in-need cannot share with the support system, then this valuable resource is of no aid. Circumstances such as AIDS, family violence, or child sexual abuse, for example, very often result in a high degree of shame for victims. These feelings, in turn make it a necessity to hide the condition from people who are in positions to help.

The typology of reasons for natural support system breakdowns has far-reaching implications for service delivery to Puerto Ricans. It must be remembered that natural support systems very often represent the first and only source for assistance for many Puerto Ricans and other Hispanic groups. Nevertheless, it is essential to determine the state of natural support systems before and after the person-in-need seeks assistance. Natural support systems may exist in helpful forms, may exist but be temporarily out of service, may not exist as an option for some members of the community, or may not exist at all. Consequently, the failure of natural support systems to provide assistance, for whatever reason, will necessitate the person-in-need turning to formal services.

Examination of Existing Barriers to Collaborating With Natural Support Systems

Collaboration, meaning two parties coming together to meet a common need, offers prodigious potential for reaching underserved populations. However, this process is not without its challenges (Levin & Ferman, 1986). The challenges are far greater when collaboration is sought between formal settings and natural support systems. Delgado (1991) has identified the following barriers in the substance abuse area, but these also are applicable to education and other human service settings: (1) lack of trust; (2) conceptual underpinnings of assessment and intervention; (3) levels of knowledge of each other's mission and work; and (4) service delivery structure and logistics.

1. Lack of Trust. Trust represents the cornerstone of any successful effort at reaching underserved populations. Puerto Ricans, with some exceptions, have experienced great difficulties in receiving services that were mindful of their self-esteem and were based upon a clear understanding of their cultural background. Consequently, they have rightfully been very suspect of formal systems of care. This need for trust has also carried over to natural support systems. Natural support system "providers," in turn, may very well have great misgivings of getting involved with formal service providers. Collaboration requires a high degree of trust and patience if it is to succeed. Unfortunately, too often, circumstances make collaboration difficult, if not impossible, between formal and Puerto Rican natural support systems.

2. Conceptual Underpinnings of Assessment and Intervention. Behavior does not occur within a social vacuum but within existing contexts with particularistic frames of reference and expectations. The concept of culture is such a frame and is particularly important in understanding help-seeking behavior. Requests for assistance must, in turn, be treated within the context in which it is found, with a culturally-based intervention (Delgado, 1980).

Thus, a conceptual foundation that is rooted in cultural meaning will present serious challenges to formal organizations and providers. This will manifest itself in the following areas: (1) naming process -- what is the problem; (2) language and means of communication -- the language used (symbols, etc.), and an emphasis on both verbal and non-verbal communication; (3) defense mechanisms -- namely, how is behavior manifested in a way that allows a Puerto Rican to "save face"?; (4) faith in the intervention -- power of suggestion and hope for a cure; (5) constellation of people involved -- is it an individual or group problem?; and (6) does the intervention meet with the expectations of what constitutes assistance? -- in short, is the person-in-need receiving the help that is expected or the help that has meaning?

Clearly, the above factors have profound implications in the help-seeking process. Different conceptualizations of a problem make it difficult, if not impossible, for formal providers to know what intervention to suggest or use. For example, if the person seeking help believes that problems are the result of spiritual intervention (metaphysical source), then they can only be addressed through spiritual means. This is out of the realm of formal providers.

3. Levels of Knowledge of Each Other's Mission and Work. Lack of awareness and misunderstanding of how natural support systems and formal systems operate represents a barrier for the development of collaboration activities between these two parties. Unfortunately, lack of awareness very often translates into suspicion/mistrust and assumptions that have nothing to do with operative reality. Nevertheless, this barrier cannot be minimized if efforts are to be successful in bringing the two systems together.

Gaps in knowledge are complicated by the following factors: (1) lack of a resource directory on natural support systems; (2) lack of a resource directory of formal services in Spanish; (3) fear on the part of some natural support systems providers that "authorities" will attempt to prevent them from practicing (this is particularly true with folk healers); and (4) minimal or no history of collaboration between formal and informal providers.

4. Service Delivery Structure and Logistics. Natural support systems have their own ways of structuring and delivering assistance, and this represents an important and often overlooked aspect of why they are very often a primary choice of help-seekers. Natural support systems do not subscribe to the concept of catchment area -- a human service concept that dictates who is qualified to receive services within a geographical region. Natural support systems do not function on a 9-to-5 work week, with holidays and vacation periods. Natural support systems providers generally view their work as a personal or human mission, not a mechanical "delivery" of services. Delgado (1991) notes that accountability concerns influence organizational structure and logistics. Formal delivery systems' use of governmental and private funds necessitates the development of standardized procedures (intake forms, payment levels, eligibility criteria, etc.). In natural support systems, record keeping is not necessary. Natural support systems are accountable, however. They are accountable to the community. The community, in turn, regulates who practices by influencing whether or not referrals are made to natural support systems providers.

Next Steps: New Questions

In a review of the literature on first grade Puerto Rican children, we found a paucity of studies on Puerto Rican natural support systems and their relation to schools. Clearly there is need for further research to document the experiences of individuals working in this arena and to develop case studies that illuminate actual relationships between social agencies, schools, and natural support systems.

The literature review highlighted several important themes: (1) the literature of the 1960s noted the importance of understanding Puerto Rican culture and highlighted migration patterns and issues of adjustment; (2) the 1970s literature placed heavy emphasis on bilingual education and teaching methods, with only minimal mention of the importance of culture, and (3) the 1980s literature highlighted the difficulty of teaching Puerto Rican children and emphasized their "deficits" such as attention deficit disorders, low IQ, behavior problems, and others. There has been little research, however, on the relationships of informal natural support systems, human service agencies, schools, families, and children's development and learning.

Our research project seeks to explore key questions pertaining to the relations between Puerto Rican natural support systems and the educational and social well-being of Puerto Rican children and their families. The barriers outlined above cannot be ignored if educators and providers wish to reach this population. Based on our literature review, continuing research needs to focus on the following questions:

1. To what extent is the availability and use of natural support systems important to motivating Puerto Rican children to be ready for pre-school and school, and to achieve in school?

2. How do natural support systems networks influence parents' perceptions of their own or their children's competencies, styles, and beliefs?

3. How do Puerto Rican families use natural support systems to obtain information and support? Which of the four types of support systems are most used and which have the greatest influence on children of various ages and families?

4. How do human service agencies and schools provide information, support, and services to parents of very young children as well as to school-age children? How can natural support systems be linked to and successfully coordinated with these formal services?

5. What is the result of collaborations between natural support systems and formal systems? How can these two systems function in ways that minimize the undermining of natural support systems and maximize the strengths of each system?

6. What kinds of information and training will assist school and agency personnel to develop positive and productive interactions with natural support systems in order to help more students succeed?

7. How does the influence of natural support systems on the success of children in school differ in Puerto Rican, Mexican, and Cuban communities?

Implications and Recommendations for Reaching the Puerto Rican Community Through Use of Natural Support Systems

The use of natural support systems to reach Puerto Rican communities offers much promise for the delivery of social and education services that are culturally sensitive. The use of natural support systems, as noted by Gottlieb (1988, 13), has appeal to the entire political spectrum:

> For conservatives, the concept of social support resonates because it connotes reliance on voluntary and private arrangements for the delivery of human services because it smacks of a self-help ethos. For liberals, social support represents one avenue to empowering citizens, enlarging their control over their own lives, and eventually leading to reforms in the community's health and welfare institutions that are predicated on greater public participation.

Consequently, it is very important to explore avenues for bringing about greater cooperation and collaboration between formal systems and natural support systems. There are four particularly important directions to explore if we are to draw upon natural support systems to improve the changes of young children's success in school and to serve their families. These directions are; (1) training and education; (2) research; (3) program development; and (4) general issues.

Training and Education

Human service and school personnel should receive training on the principles of natural support systems and how they can best be utilized in reaching the Puerto Rican community. If this training were conducted by natural support systems providers it would not only increase staff skill and knowledge, but also help to narrow the communication gap between formal and informal systems.

Efforts need to be made to provide information to natural support systems providers on the types of services and educational programs that would benefit the community. Outreach should target natural support systems providers and help increase their awareness of what formal services are available, eligibility criteria, and how best to help their patrons (clients) access resources.

New staff should be provided with opportunities to orient themselves to the community before beginning their jobs. Venturing into the community provides good opportunities to better understand and appreciate the people they hope to help and educate and the contexts in which they live and work. This also will help to minimize suspicion on both sides.

Research

Intake and data gathering forms should be changed to gather information on natural support systems. Baseline data are needed to study how natural support systems change over time, when natural support systems are blended into formal services, and what happens to them over time.

Formal support services need to identify natural support systems to study the extent of resources available within a community. This information could be made available in resource directories to assist staff or educators in making appropriate referrals.

Data are needed on the characteristics of natural support systems providers. Further, it is necessary to document in greater detail, possibly through ethnographic efforts, how natural support systems providers function, prevent burnout, and learn their crafts. This information will be useful in bridging gaps between conventional efforts at training staff and how natural support systems providers learn how to help.

Program Development

Natural support systems may provide essential leadership in bringing together community, human service agencies, and schools. Every effort must be made by formal service agencies to include the community (in the form of natural support systems), families, and students in the design and delivery of services and education to Puerto Rican and other Hispanic populations.

After research is completed, it may be possible to actively involve natural support systems providers as adjuncts to formal programs. They may be involved as volunteers, or if possible, and not compromising, as staff. In addition, formal support programs attempting to reach the Puerto Rican community should endeavor to hire local residents whenever possible. This investment will increase the likelihood that the community will feel comfortable in utilizing services.

The location of formal support services plays an influential role in conveying to the community a willingness to reach out. It may be possible to locate services in natural support systems settings such as churches, social clubs, and even grocery stores. The integration of formal services within natural support systems settings increases the likelihood of services being culturally sensitive and easily accessible.

General Issues

Universities, particularly schools of education and human services, should endeavor to prepare students for their work in communities. Every effort should be made to develop field placements and other learning opportunities (e.g., trips, guest lecturers) to provide exposure to and interaction with the community.

Educational and human service settings must revise the definition of "family" to assure relevance to the Puerto Rican community. This means a definition of family with very fluid boundaries. The family is central to the community, and an appropriate definition of family is central to any effort at reaching this population.

Funding sources must be made aware of Puerto Rican natural support systems and every effort should be made to allow programs sufficient flexibility in design to enlist this important resource.

Conclusion

Natural support systems are present and important in the Puerto Rican community. Although there are working definitions and conceptualizations of the concept of natural support systems, there are also barriers to access to services and problems in collaboration between natural support systems and formal support services. We have sketched the implications of what is known so far about natural support systems and of what needs to be known to integrate all community resources to help families help their children become "ready" for preschool and to succeed in school.

Based on present knowledge, we have made a series of recommendations with far-reaching implications for education and human services. It will not be easy to develop a relationship between natural support systems and formal systems. However, if the needs of Puerto Rican families and children are to be met in a culturally sensitive manner, there is no alternative but to begin research and development to improve these connections.

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